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VISCERAL ABSTRACTIONS

Sianne Ngai

“the spirit and the beef”

—Rob Halpern, *Music for Porn*

Eating Face

Barbara Johnson opens *Persons and Things* with a memorable anecdote about her childhood inability “to eat anything that had a face.”¹ As she elaborates:

Not anything that *had had* a face: I was not an incipient vegetarian and was perfectly happy to devour a hamburger, but I could not bring myself to consume anything that might be looking at me while I ate it or that continued to smile cheerfully as parts of its body disappeared into my mouth—gingerbread men or jack o’ lantern candies. (4)

Highlighting a gut feeling about ingestion, this anecdote calls up the most common definitions of visceral: “felt in or as if in the internal organs of the body”; “instinctive, unreasoning”; “dealing with crude or elemental emotions.”² It is not hard to understand how any of these qualities might attach to the act of consuming a humanoid body part. What, however, if we read Johnson’s anecdote as a story about a visceral response, not to a visceral act or visceral object, but to a kind of abstraction?

This possibility might initially seem hard to swallow, since the visceral seems to encompass everything the abstract is not. Indeed, its specificity and corporeality seem to have made “visceral” resistant to theory in a way that noticeably

contrasts with the fate of “abstract”—which, as Leigh Claire La Berge points out, has been taken up by so many different theoretical discourses that when deployed casually “its precise meaning is almost impossible to ascertain.”³ While abstraction in aesthetics refers to “a mode of nonfigurative representation,” and in philosophy to “something not fully realizable by a particular,” La Berge notes that in popular as well as specialist writing on finance, “abstract” has increasingly come to designate “complex,” “fictitious,” and “unrepresentable”—adjectives that disturbingly imply that the understanding, representation, and regulation of contemporary financial operations are somehow no longer possible.⁴

Understood as fictitious or unreal, the meaning of abstract in contemporary economic writing is the exact opposite of what it means in Karl Marx. For Marx, as for G. W. F. Hegel, for whom knowledge moves from abstract to increasingly concrete notions, the distinction between abstract and concrete does not map neatly onto the distinction between the ideal and the real.⁵ As I show below, there is what commentators call “practical” or “real abstraction” for Marx (even if Marx himself does not use these terms). Moreover, in Marx’s critique of political economy, the abstract is simple while the concrete is complex, in the sense of being the “result” or “concentration” of multiple determinations: “The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception.”⁶ As La Berge glosses this passage, for Marx “the concrete is a metabolized result and the abstract a social intuition capable of leading to the concrete,” which is precisely why the two must be deployed together: “If we begin with too abstract a concept to orient our investigation, then we preclude our own access to the quotidian, material, perceptible world. And if we begin with too concrete a term, then we may be unable to understand its organization within a larger social totality.”⁷

Across all the theoretical traditions in which it has played central roles, however, the abstract is consistently defined as opposed to the concrete, and as such closely associated with the nonsensuous and unparticularized. This brings us back to the oddness of reading Johnson’s anecdote as a response to abstraction. What could be more of a corporeal experience than “parts of [another’s] body disappear[ing] into [one’s] mouth”? And what could be more irreducibly particular than what Emmanuel Lévinas calls the “face of the other”?⁸ Yet the cheerful visage we find stamped not just on food but on virtually every type of artifact of the capitalist economy, from Band-Aids to diapers to text messages, is obviously not a

representation of a specific, unrepeatable individual, nor even the idea of one. The smiley face rather expresses the face of no one in particular, or the averaged-out, dedifferentiated face of a generic anyone. It calls up an idea of being stripped of all determinate qualities and reduced to its simplest form through an implicit act of “social” equalization, or the relating of each and every individual face to the totality of all faces.

The simplest abstractions are the achievements of the most highly developed societies, as Marx notes in the *Grundrisse*, though in a way that their unreflective use in political economy often obscures. He elaborates this claim with the example of “labour” or “labour as such”: a “general” abstraction “aris[ing] only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common . . . to all” and thus “ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone.”⁹ There are thus determinate conditions for the emergence of the abstract category of “labour in general,” for which Marx credits Adam Smith for first introducing into political economy, despite its “validity—precisely because of [its] abstractness—for all epochs.”¹⁰ At the same time, Marx suggests that there are also historical conditions under which “labour in general” not only becomes mentally conceivable but also “true in practice”:

Indifference toward specific labours conforms to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. . . . Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society—in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category “labour,” “labour as such,” labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.¹¹

A similar thing could be said about the smiley face, which first achieves its “practical truth” not in rapidly industrializing, nineteenth-century England but in the postwar United States during the golden age of capitalism. Designed in 1963 by the adman Harvey Ball, who was hired to create a logo to improve customer service and employee cooperation for the State Mutual Life Assurance Company of America (now Allmerica Financial Corporation) after a series of disorienting

mergers and takeovers, the smiley face quickly migrated out of workplace culture into sixties consumer culture and counterculture.¹² To this day, numerous subcultures continue to appropriate the corporate version of the smiley and endow it with ironic or subversive inflections. Whether as the bloodstained smiley of Allan Moore's *Watchmen* or the relentlessly affirmative "roll-back" smiley of Walmart, however, the smiley always confronts us with an image of an eerily abstracted being. Is the disturbing effect of this icon's averaged-out appearance something we should chalk up to a long-standing American phobia about the loss of individual distinction to social homogenization? Or could it be registering something else?

Finally, if it is the idea of eating an abstraction that generates visceral sensations for Johnson, what about the equally unsettling if arguably queerer idea of fucking one? This is what we are asked to imagine in *Music for Porn* (2012), a contemporary book of war poetry in which Rob Halpern depicts "the soldier's body *hieroglyph of value*" as simultaneously "spirit" and "beef."¹³ For Halpern, the body of The Soldier is one abstracted at multiple levels: as a national representation "severed from the real bodies of military men"; as a corpse removed from public view; as a homosexual icon or "exaggerated type like one you'd see in gay porn from the 70s"; and as a "*hieroglyph*" or allegory of value (153). At the very same time, this abstract-allegorical body is incongruously presented as the visceral object of the poet's lust, sexual fantasy, and a range of conflicting emotions: love, hate, disgust, shame. In evoking "the soldier as neither a thing nor an idea, but rather a relation *like capital like value* visible and measurable only in the effects it achieves and the affects it arouses," *Music for Porn* not only insists on the compatibility but stages the interpenetration of queer and Marxist thought (51).

This essay focuses on Halpern's decisively queer take on visceral abstraction—a take facilitated by the poetry's explicit engagement with Marx's concept of abstract labor and his notoriously tricky description of it as "value-forming substance."¹⁴ Before doing so, we need to take a closer look at Marx's concept itself.¹⁵

Abstract Labor

In the capitalist production process, existing value in the form of constant capital or what Marx at times calls dead labor is brought together with variable capital or living labor. Only living labor has the capacity to produce additional value while also carrying over the value of the commodities functioning as means of production, such as machines and raw materials, into the value of the product. Capitalist production is thus a "valorization" process that takes place only when the two things whose separation forms the basic precondition of generalized commodity

production, labor-power and means of production, are rejoined through the newly privileged and expanded agency of money capital. Yet the values valorized in production also have to be “realized” through their conversion into the independent and necessary form of value, which is money.¹⁶ As Jim Kincaid glosses:

Value is not realized, made *real*, until the commodity has been sold for money—and that depends on its use-value finding a matching demand on the market. If no one wants to buy the commodity, or if those who want or need it lack the necessary cash to buy it, then some or all the labour that went into making that commodity is negated, wasted, annulled, does not achieve real existence. Value exists only potentially until the sale is made, and the final metamorphosis of commodity into money has been effected.¹⁷

The realization of value is an unstable process that depends on the uncoordinated actions of a vast number of independently acting, often unknowingly interconnected actors. It is here, in the $C'-M'$ phase of the circuit of capital, where the “suprasensible or social” phenomenon of abstract labor first emerges.¹⁸

Abstract labor contains a fundamental tension: it is the form that *social* labor assumes in a society based on the *private* organization of production and circulation. As Marx states in the *Grundrisse*, because capitalist production is not immediately organized by society but rather consists of private, independently expended acts of labor, “the social character of production is *posited* only *post festum* with the elevation of products to exchange values and the exchange of these exchange values.”¹⁹ Abstract labor therefore reflects what Ernest Mandel calls the basic contradiction of capitalism: “that goods are at one and the same time the product of social labour and private labour; that the social character of the private labour spent in their production cannot be immediately and directly established; and that *commodities must circulate*, their value must be *realized*, before we can know the proportion of private labour expended in their production that is recognized as social labour.”²⁰

It is crucial to emphasize that abstract labor is not an abstraction by thought, but rather achieved by the collective practice of actors who do not know they are achieving it.²¹ As Marx puts it in a passage where he famously describes value as a “social hieroglyph,” “Men do not . . . bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values *because they see* these objects . . . as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour” (my emphasis). Rather, he notes, “The reverse is true: *by* equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour.

They do this without being aware of it.”²² Value and abstract labor, the “substance” that gives value its “form,” are thus the achievements of the empirical behaviors of persons, even if they are produced, as Marx likes to say, “behind their backs.”²³ While this point is stressed by multiple commentators, Georg Lukács puts it in an especially compelling way, in his late and unfinished work *The Ontology of Social Being*:

[The emergence of the “average character of labour”] . . . is not a matter of mere knowledge . . . but rather the emergence of a new ontological category of labour itself in the course of its increasing socialization, which only much later is brought into consciousness. Socially necessary (and therefore *ipso facto* abstract) labour is also a reality, an aspect of the ontology of social being, an achieved real abstraction in real objects, quite independent of whether this is achieved by consciousness or not. In the nineteenth century, millions of independent artisans experienced the effects of this abstraction of socially necessary labour as their own ruin, i.e. they experienced in practice the concrete consequences, without having any suspicion that what they were facing was an achieved abstraction of the social process; this abstraction has the same ontological rigor of facticity as a car that runs you over.²⁴

Abstract labor is difficult to grasp, Nicole Pepperell stresses, because it is what Marx called “suprasensible or social” or what we would today call “emergent,” arising “as an indirect, aggregate effect of complex interactions among many different sorts of social practices, none of which is explicitly oriented to achieving this specific overall effect.”²⁵ Abstract labor is also difficult because its concept is circular. When we think of how labor might “form” or “produce” value, we naturally assume the former’s logical and ontological priority. First, the labor; then, the value. Yet abstract labor—the only labor that for Marx specifically constitutes value, as opposed to material wealth—is not labor physically expended by workers in real time in heterogeneous and uncoordinated acts of production, as Michael Heinrich emphasizes. It is rather a “relation of social validation” posited retroactively in exchange, which fulfills the actual function of relating independently performed labors to the total labor of society.²⁶ The relation between exchange-value and abstract labor is thus one of reflexive circularity: as is so often the case in Marx’s writing, as many commentators including Marx himself note, what seems like the presupposition (abstract labor) turns out to be the result and what seems like a result (exchange-value) turns out to be the presupposition.

It is of course true that abstract or what Marx elsewhere calls “socially necessary” labor ends up having a palpable effect on concrete, actually expended labor, insofar as it comes to inform, via the mediations of the wage and other, similarly emergent capitalist abstractions like the average rate of profit, how concrete labor is practically organized, whether or not it is intensified in what lines of production, how much or little of it hired, and under what conditions.²⁷ And so it is not the case that socially necessary labor, simply in being posited retroactively in circulation rather than expended in the real time of production, is somehow radically disconnected from empirical labor. To forestall this impression, Diane Elson argues that abstract and concrete labor are not generic “kinds” but rather “aspects” of capitalist labor mediating each other, though with the former aspect dominating the latter.²⁸ Yet abstract value-forming labor is still not identical to concrete or actually expended labor, just as it is not the same thing as the abstract *concept* of “labour in general” or “labour pure and simple.” As Heinrich argues, what makes “concrete acts of expended labor *count* as a particular quantum of value-constituting abstract labor, or . . . *valid* as a particular quantum of abstract labor, and therefore as an element of the total labor of society” is the mediation of the individual labor of isolated producers to the total labor of society.²⁹ In societies where producers do not explicitly coordinate their acts of production, this mediation happens only when their products are exchanged. But although the mediations of exchange have the “formal ability to weave a web of social coherence among the mass of private individuals all acting independently of another,” as Alfred Sohn-Rethel notes, the socializing effects of their activities *also come to appear to them as an independent force not of their own making*, one that oppositionally confronts them as a “second nature.”³⁰ As Marx puts it, referring to the rise of the world market, what appears is not just the “connection of the individual with all, but at the same time also the independence of this connection from the individual.”³¹

The “*connection of the individual with all, but at the same time also the independence of this connection from the individual*”: this is what I would argue we “see” when faced with the capitalist smiley. It is perhaps the best explanation for why this utterly banal image nonetheless has the power to unsettle us. “In a society in which individual activities have a *private* character, and in which therefore the interests of individuals are divided and counterposed,” writes Lucio Colletti, “the moment of *social unity* can only be realized in the form of an *abstract equalization*.”³² Abstract labor, the result of this equalization, is therefore labor “said to be *equal* or *social*, not because it genuinely belongs to *everyone* and hence mediates between the individuals, but because it belongs to *nobody* and is obtained by

ignoring the real inequalities between the individuals.”³³ Or as I. I. Rubin puts it, abstract labor “becomes social labour *only* as impersonal and homogeneous labour.”³⁴ I would therefore argue that the visceral feelings provoked by the smiley are underpinned by something more profound than a bohemian distaste for corporate aesthetics (such as the sort encouraged by the slick anticonsumerist magazine *Adbusters*) or a liberal individualist dread about the erasure of individual particularity. For the smiley is not just an image of abstract personhood but also an uncanny personification of the collectively achieved abstractions of the capitalist economy: abstract labor, value, capital. Its unflinching gaze as we encounter it daily as a cookie, on a price tag, or in a comic book, confronts us in a palpably unsettling way with the radically alienated status of *sociality itself* under conditions of generalized commodity production.

Let us deepen our discussion of Marx’s concept of abstract labor a little further before turning to *Music for Porn*. We have seen that for Marx, abstract labor qua “value-forming substance” is a form of labor specific to capitalist reproduction and its peculiarly asocial sociality.³⁵ Patrick Murray helpfully refers to this labor as “practically abstract” labor, which he meticulously disambiguates from two very different versions of abstract labor in *Capital*: the richly phenomenological account of universal human labor as a “metabolic interaction between man and nature,” which Marx discusses briefly in chapter 7 of the first volume; and more significantly, since it is more easily confused with it, the analytically abstract category of “labour in general” that we saw Marx credit Smith for introducing into political economy in the *Grundrisse*.³⁶ Though historically determinate in origin, this abstraction has a legitimate, general applicability to the labor of all societies in a way that implies, and for Murray, permits, its conflation with “simple” physiological labor.³⁷ As labor from which all concrete qualities have been subtracted and reduced to a hypothetical, minimal expenditure of calories, “simple” labor is also a mental abstraction. Although we can easily imagine or think of it, no labor in such reduced form actually exists (although as Murray notes, the concept of such labor is logically presupposed by the concept of “labor in general”).³⁸

For all these reasons, it seems clear that Marx’s concept of abstract value-forming labor is neither “human labour in general” nor the concept of “simple” physiological labor that the former logically entails. Confusions nonetheless arise because of the infamously contradictory first chapter on the commodity in volume 1 of *Capital*, where Marx repeatedly refers to abstract, value-forming labor in exactly these terms: as “an expenditure of human labour power, in the physiological sense”; as “human labour pure and simple, the expenditure of human

labour in general”; as “simple average labour”; as the “expenditure of simple labour-power, i.e. of the labour-power possessed in his bodily organism by every ordinary man, on the average, without being developed in any special way.”³⁹ The contradiction comes to a head in “The Value-Form, or Exchange-Value,” section 3 of chapter 1, where we are confronted with diametrically opposed accounts of value-creating labor placed in almost overlapping proximity:

It is only the expression of equivalence between different sorts of commodities which brings to view the specific character of value-creating labour, by actually reducing the different kinds of labour embedded in the different kinds of commodity to their common quality of being human labour in general.

However, it is not enough to express the specific character of the labour which goes to make up the value of the linen. Human labour-power in its fluid state, or human labor, creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value in its coagulated state, in objective form. The value of the linen as a congealed mass of human labour can be expressed only as an “objectivity” [*Gegenständlichkeit*], a thing which is materially different from the linen and yet common to the linen and all other commodities.⁴⁰

The first of the two paragraphs tells us that “specific character of value-creating labour,” which Marx has already referred to several times as “abstract labour,” is brought to view “only” through “the expression of equivalence” that “actually reduces” different labors to a social average. This evokes what we have seen Marx’s commentators call the real or practical abstraction of the capitalist realization process, the retroactive positing of social labor through the transformation of independently produced commodities into money in exchange. So far, so clear. The ambiguity enters with the next paragraph, which, in an unremarked transition, seems subtly to shift its purview from labor rendered abstract in exchange (in which the becoming-value of labor entails the social equalization of multiple, independently performed labors, hence an “expression of equivalence”) to what seems to be a different kind of abstraction of labor in the production process (in which the becoming-value of labor involves something like its transformation from a liquid to a solid state, hence an “expression of objectivity”). This is where Marx describes value, elsewhere described as a form of *abstract*, “suprasensible or social” labor, as a “congealed mass of human labor.”⁴¹ Startling in its incongruity with Marx’s previous presentation of value-forming labor as socially averaged or equalized labor, the phrase now invites the reader to regard

“value-forming substance” as a *physical* substance, which in turn seems explicitly to invite a view of value-constituting labor as departicularized, “simple” physiological labor.⁴²

How do we account for this seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of “suprasensible or social” *and* sensuously material accounts of abstract, value-forming labor? Noting the difficulty of clearly distinguishing Marx’s own point of view at moments from those of the economists he subjects to critique, commentators who focus on what Kincaid calls the “performative dimension” of *Capital* might invite us to attribute it, as they tend to attribute the tonal ambiguity, stylistic assertiveness, and occasional theoretical inconsistency of the early chapters of the first volume overall, to Marx’s often deceptively unmarked use of irony or what Dominick LaCapra calls “double-voicing.”⁴³ It is true that in a manner akin to Hegel’s way of inhabiting the perspectives of the various shapes of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* (which Katrin Pahl suggestively describes as a kind of “free indirect discourse”), Marx often ventriloquizes the perspectives of the “pundits of economics” to mock them.⁴⁴ Critics such as Robert Paul Wolff accordingly follow the early lead of Edmund Wilson in reading the first chapter of *Capital* as a “burlesque” of political economy as well as of the idealist metaphysics that tacitly inform its major concepts.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Murray argues that Marx’s counter-intuitive alignments of abstract labor in chapter 1 with “substance,” “embodiment,” “crystals,” and “congealed labor” are aggressively “taunting” and perhaps even meant to “shock” the reader.⁴⁶ Indeed, Murray suggests that one of Marx’s earliest descriptions of abstract labor, as the “‘residue’ that remains once all the concrete, natural properties of commodities have been abstracted away,” is a satire of “Descartes’s famous derivation of material substance (*res extensa*) from his analysis of the bit-turned-blob of wax at the end of the second Meditation.”⁴⁷ Pepperell pushes this line of reading farthest by reading Marx’s early chapters as a literal instance of satirical theater: as a series of “plays” containing smaller “playlets” in which Marx amplifies his parody of the arguments of bourgeois economy by aligning them with consciousness’s various claims to certainty in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.⁴⁸ The voice in chapter 1 describing “abstract labour” in such a strangely universal, un-Marxian way as “human labour, pure and simple,” and “value” as a strangely thinglike “congealed mass of human labor” might thus be that of an economic and/or metaphysical point of view that Marx is only temporarily ventriloquizing in order to satirize.⁴⁹

Reading Marx’s writing in this section as satirically double-voiced (and therefore booby-trapped) would certainly be a way to explain the contradictory characterizations of abstract value-forming labor in the two paragraphs above. If

not a parodic echo of the story of melting/hardening wax in Descartes derivation of *res extensa*, as Murray suggests, for instance, one might hear in the second paragraph's reference to value as a "congealed mass of human labor" a parody of Ricardo's embodied-labor theory of value. Yet the meaning of the contradiction as such deserves more attention. Highlighting a metamorphosis in its form of appearance, the distinction between "fluid" and "coagulated" labor in the second paragraph is fairly clear: the former refers to living labor deployed as variable capital in the production process, whereas the latter corresponds to dead or past labor—that is, previously produced, realized, or fixed value—in the form of commodities functioning as constant capital or means of production. The second paragraph emphasizes that the former "creates" value, while the latter simply is or "becomes" value (Marx refers to this "previously worked up" labor as "crystallized" or "congealed" labor repeatedly elsewhere in *Capital* and in many other writings as well). But what is the relation of the abstract labor/value relation in the production process, once we recognize its interacting facets of "fluid" living labor and "congealed" labor, to the abstract labor/value relation described in the first paragraph about exchange? Is Marx presenting accounts of the *same* abstraction or becoming-value of labor from the dual perspectives of circulation and production, as if to reflect the "twofold" nature of labor itself—always both abstract and concrete—under conditions of generalized commodity production?⁵⁰ Are these intended to emphasize distinct yet fundamentally continuous ways in which labor finds itself abstracted by the "law of value," one corresponding to the realization of value in the form of exchange-value, the other to the creation of use-values and surplus value? If there are in fact two distinct concepts of the becoming abstract or value of labor here, what is the relation between the two, and what does *that* relation tell us about "specific character of value-creating labour"?

One thing we can be certain about is that the passage's tone, like that of the entire chapter, is hard to pin down. Marx's diction changes midstream, making an unannounced shift from the dry, anti-imagistic, theoretical language of political economy used to describe value-creating labor in the first paragraph ("It is only the expression of equivalence between different sorts of commodities which brings to view the specific character of value-creating labour") to the sensuously material language of fluidity and viscosity used to describe it in the second. Passages like the second make it easier to understand the otherwise puzzling proliferation of "naturalist" or "substantialist" approaches to Marx's "value theory of labour."⁵¹ Finally, while Marx's language of congealing substance is empirical or even "materialist" in the vulgar sense (where "matter" means visible, tangible, physical substance), Marx's *use* of that language is imagistic or figurative. Regardless of

the ambiguity surrounding the characterization of value-constituting labor in the two paragraphs above, by the end we are left with that labor reframed by metaphors that make value-creating labor *seem like* generic, transhistorical labor.⁵² Indeed, these metaphors leave the reader with a conspicuously un-Marxian impression: that as a “crystal” of labor lodged unchanging in the commodity, value is a natural, intrinsic, embodied property of the individual commodity, as opposed to an emergent, historically contingent relation.

While sharing the interest of LaCapra, Wolff, Kincaid, Murray, and Pepperell in recovering *Capital*’s affective and specifically satirical dimension, Keston Sutherland takes a different tack in a reading of this same passage. Instead of arguing that Marx’s description of value as a “congealed mass,” Ben Fowkes’s translation of “bloße Gallerte,” is problematically substantialist, or so grossly materialist that we might even suspect it of being a parody of Descartes or Ricardo, Sutherland argues that the term is too conceptually *abstract*; that like Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling’s translation of the same phrase, “mere congealation of homogeneous labor,” it does a disservice to the visceral impact of Marx’s “bloße Gallerte unterschiedsloser menschlicher Arbeit” by erasing the specificity of Gallerte: a gelatinous condiment made from the “meat, bone, [and] connective tissue” of various animals.⁵³ Sutherland writes,

Gallerte [unlike “congelation”] is not an abstract noun. Gallerte is now, and was when Marx used it, the name not of a process like freezing or coagulating, but of a specific commodity. Marx’s German readers will not only have bought Gallerte, they will have eaten it; and in using the name of this particular commodity to describe not “homogeneous” but, on the contrary, “unterschiedslose,” that is, “undifferentiated” human labour, Marx’s intention is not simply to educate his readers but also to disgust them.

As a word referring to a more richly determined and socially meaningful artifact, *Gallerte* as opposed to *congelation* undeniably bestows greater detail to Marx’s unparticularized, perversely substance-like image for the objective expression of value. In both cases, however, the imagery of *substance* remains fundamentally the same—and the use of that imagery remains fundamentally catachrestic.⁵⁴ The question of whether Gallerte is more true to the spirit of *Capital* than congelation thus seems less important than the question of why Marx is using physical matter as such a conspicuously strained metaphor for the concept of abstract, value-constituting labor to begin with. What is gained by using an image that makes a specifically capitalist abstraction (and specifically Marxist theoretical concept),

abstract or socially necessary labor, sound confusingly *like* simple physiological human labor? Is it because there is no existing terminology other than that of substance to express the “objectivity” of “suprasensible or social” value?⁵⁵ To rephrase the question, borrowing language from Wolff, why *must* Marx mobilize catachresis to capture the peculiar ontology of capitalist abstractions?⁵⁶

The Soldier's Body

Music for Porn's treatment of the male soldier's body as an eroticized abstraction—but also, quite specifically, a capitalist abstraction—has its own unique way of meditating on the questions raised by Marx's presentation of abstract labor above. Though the labor of soldiers is what Marx would call unproductive (i.e., nonproductive of value, which does not rule out its possible necessity for enabling value-productive labor to take place), the body of the soldier in Halpern's text is so tightly coupled with “value” that the terms almost always appear together: “Value clings to the soldier like self-preservation *a film of cash*” (152).⁵⁷ This body enters the world of the poem already “working overtime as allegory” (153). Even prior to being reenlisted by Halpern to explore capitalist abstractions and their material effects, the soldier is already The Soldier: a “phony apparition” (152); “an exaggerated type” (153); a “comic strip character” with features as “amplified and distorted” as “those of the capitalist, the worker, the terrorist” (152) and who “might appear among the Village People, that band of iconic queer bodies: Indian Chief, Construction Worker, Leatherman, Cowboy, Cop, Soldier” (153).⁵⁸ As *Music for Porn* suggests, there is a further complexity to The Soldier's allegorical abstractness, since the official symbolism he provides for the coherence of the nation depends on his being a “sacrifice” or body for use (50). While the soldier's labor is thus like that of the sex worker, Halpern suggests that his contractual agreement to being potentially *used up entirely* makes him that much more of a “meat man,” “purest meat,” “*bare life, dead meat*” (83, 50). Indeed, one of the other things for which Halpern's soldier functions as allegory is a “corpse”— moreover, one that the nation hygienically hides from view (50). Qua “sacrifice,” the soldier's *death* can be brought into the public sphere and mourned, but ironically not the soldier's *body*, qua “corpse.”

Yet at every moment where we might expect *Music for Porn* to rescue this repeatedly abstracted and occulted body by insisting on its concreteness as object of the poet's lust, the description flips back into a testimony to its abstractness. As if to refuse to let us ever forget the covert barring of the combatant's corpse from public view by repeatedly reenacting it, “the body” is a perpetually “withdrawn”

body, subsumed into economic abstractions almost immediately on mention: “The body required to ensure the nation’s vision of freedom and democracy is a dead one *note the nimbus around his withdrawn corpse, function of pure exchange*” (55); “My soldier’s no match for this, he’s too real, being capital’s proper corpus, extension of its management and concern” (152). First expropriated as sign from the bodies of real combatants who no longer control its dissemination or meaning, only to be “removed from public circulation” as corpse, it comes as no surprise that the soldier’s body seems available to stand in for virtually anything (“*function of pure exchange*”). He can even seem like the agent of his “own” alienation and ensuing symbolic availability: “Having cut himself loose from the social relations that make him what he is, his figure stands in for universal profit” (153).

“Universal profit” is the organizing principle of a society for which global wars have repeatedly helped fend off economic crisis, and whose official military culture surreptitiously conscripts—even while explicitly proscribing—male homoerotic affect and camaraderie, “pressing it into the service of nation building,” as Halpern notes about Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* (50). The instrumental use of “queer affections . . . to bind our national interests” thus perversely results in the denial of the very body for which homoerotic desire is aroused, as that body becomes even further sublimated, by way of *The Soldier*’s more conventional symbolic work, into transcendent concepts like democracy and freedom (50). It is this particular elision of the soldier’s body, in contradictory lockstep with its simultaneous exploitation *and* eroticization for national symbolic ends, that Halpern calls “unbearable,” and which his experiment in making poetry into an accompaniment to pornography tries to undo representationally by countering its abstraction with—more abstraction (47). Rather than insist on the concretely physical as every abstraction’s obscured truth, as do many of philosophy’s new materialisms, *Music for Porn* is a poetry about war in which the soldier’s body is phantasmically reclaimed precisely through the mediation of allegory, and indeed by a doubling down on its use.

The difficulty of this political project is mirrored formally in *Music for Porn*’s unstable status with respect to genre, as it alternates between sequences of stark, carefully patterned objectivist lyrics (some collaged from site reports and military intelligence interviews), prose poems in a more discursive vein, and essays that, in directly addressing the theoretical aims of the lyric and prose poems, enable Halpern to fold an account of the book’s making into the book itself. The theoretical essays are haunted, however, by an italicized subdiscourse that implicitly questions the validity of the statements to which they cling by whispering substitutable expressions: “vehicle of exchange and pleasure *receptacle of cash*

and cum" (158); "militarization *financialization*" (153); "phony apparition *fragile appearance*" (152); "allegories *zombies of living labor*" (155); "ghost *money*" (154). The main effect of these phrases is that of correcting or even undoing the concepts immediately preceding them, even when their function also seems to be explicating or elaborating them further:

I want to undo Whitman's militarized vision *democracy fulfilled* by betraying its perversity. And yet my poems become evermore distorted, frustrated, and perverted in the process *turned away from their impossible aim* because their own utopian longings are blocked by current conditions under which a demilitarized world is inconceivable *depressing conclusion of this research*.⁵⁹

Capitalist abstractions and their palpable effects intermingle constantly with the language of sexual trade, with concepts like circulation, overproduction, and trade imbalance mixed into descriptions of blow jobs: "The feel of his balls in my mouth is pretty hot, and his theory of agrarian development in the South is even hotter" (111). The coupling of the sexually explicit with forms like value and capital is especially prominent: "Value clings to the soldier like self-preservation *a film of cash, relation of no relation* betraying my love for the death drive" (152); "Just as he disavows the debauchery of capital *whose servant he is* my soldier becomes evermore debauched *sinks below the hemisphere of sense, as I might sink my nose in his ass* down along the precipitous fault of old imperialisms" (153). More importantly, this "interpenetration of corpus and finance" by which "global processes . . . collide with the body's intimate recesses" is reinforced by an image of a congealing substance exactly identical to the kind we have seen used by Marx and highlighted in Sutherland's reading of Marx:

The hole a weapon makes, where global processes accumulation by dispossession, neoliberal austerity, environmental degradation, profitable incarceration collide with the body's intimate recesses all my desires and repulsions externalized, obdurate and opaque to my cognition. Residues of living labor congeal in such bodies where love hardens with the muscle interpenetration of corpus and finance.⁶⁰

Getting hard obviously refers not just to sexual arousal or to the objectification of abstract labor in/as value (a process for whose expression no concept other than that of hardening seems available) but to their perverse "interpenetration," as if this is what truly constitutes the poem's pornographic dimension. The imagery of

hardening and congealing in association with the interpenetration of sexual and economic registers recurs repeatedly throughout *Music for Porn*. Consider the following instances (my underlining below):

I mean the soldier, he's my sick muse and deserves more compassion than I appear to offer, but he's already hardened into allegory. (7)

So I go on thinking about . . . this poem, how it goes on and on and on because the moment to realize has become my job, my filth, a collective residue, a thin film of integument that hardens around a body interred behind the wall, or buried in the yard, where it goes on secreting the mystery of my well-being. (4)

Ghostly void or dead zone around my body // Collects a hyaline film and my mucous hardens / Yielding new sugars upon decomposition sordid / Shapes assume their own lost object (78)

Being is a value-slope, a residue of aura hardening inside refurbished Gulf War mat obstruction. (112)

Thus the spirit's wiped clean, purged, leaving this residue of life, a hardened edge of mucous and bile. Like a film of cash, yr hot soldier jizz, never again on earth becoming. (117)

Nature hardens in the money form *whore's make-up soldier's thighs* (156)

Nucleus of time crystallizes in a lug way down deep inside // My soldier's groin goes deeper still (93)

My soldier is the narrative of these disjunctions . . . eternal integument hardened skin around a liquidated meaning, as if his hardening alone could arrest these processes of decay (156)

Strewn in fields of waste, organs sensing under siege, mere shadow case of value, a hardened rind, or money form, whatever remains when you stop believing it. (97)

Time itself, having already become a hardened artifact of the system, renders my orgasm co-extensive with the demands of production, but this is neither true nor false. (119)

Hazy eros *residue of money* hovers around this figure, and settles on my skin. I can't wash myself of its thick condensation. (154)

And now, as the rain keeps falling on this deserted town, my social relations cohere around all these militiamen I want to fuck inside abstracted huts where no one lives anymore. (4)

My soldier thus becomes my swan, my muse, my washed-up

where. Like an allegory, he hardens around all our abstract relations *values* assuming a shape around history's contusions and contradictions, a scar where my alienable form has been hygienically sutured to the loss he represents. (156)

Aura concentrates in the figure of the fallen soldier *so attractive so repulsive* (56)

Note that for the most part, the entities described as hardening or congealing are conspicuously *intangible*: "time" (93, 119); "eros" (154); "aura" (112, 56); "social relations" (4); "void" (78); "value" or "value-slope" (97, 112); "allegory" (156, 97). Exaggerating the "abuse" of the already mixed metaphor of likening *body* to *value*, these intangibles are endowed with qualities that further underscore their ethereality: the "eros" that condenses is a "*hazy eros*"; the "value" that becomes a "hardened rind" is a "*mere shadow case of value*"; the "void" that "collects a hyaline film" is a "*ghostly void*" (154, 97, 78; my emphasis). As if to replicate Marx's similarly catachrestic descriptions of abstract labor and value, the imagery of congealing in *Music for Porn* is applied predominantly to abstractions, and especially capitalist abstractions. The abstract noun "abstraction" itself repeatedly appears in the poem as continuous with "value" and "allegory": "With the militarization *financialization* of daily life, lyric is caught up in these abstractions *value credit debt* as overproduction penetrates the soldier's body and weds it strangely to my own *radical discontinuity of flesh and world that the poem longs to bridge*" (153); "Like an allegory, he hardens around all our abstract relations *values* assuming a shape around history's contusions and contradictions" (156). "Value," arguably the most "abstract" of all Halpern's abstractions, is also the one most frequently described with the stereotypically "concrete" language of solidifying matter.

Conversely, *Music for Porn* abounds with the names of viscous fluids—"jizz," "glue," "sap," "cum," "mucous," "ejaculate," "plasma"—which are presented in the *already hardened* form of "film," "lamine," "veneer," "trace," or "residue."⁶¹ While both the viscous substance "glue" and the intangible social relation "value" appear as these "distillations of capital," only abstractions like the latter are counterintuitively depicted as *actively* congealing.⁶² Why does this admittedly subtle difference matter? Again, wherein intangible abstractions like "value," "value-slope," "allegory," and "aura" are shown in the present-tense process of "hardening" right before us as if they were physical substances *like* glue, a substance whose whole point is to harden, but which in Halpern's book does not?

With *Music for Porn*'s repeated return to the cohering functions performed

by the “soldier’s body *hieroglyph of value*,” as we see it put to the task of shoring up entities such as the nation, homophobia, the public sphere, imperialism, finance, the prison system, and capitalism, we might start to suspect that one reason both Halpern and Marx make use of the same catachrestic image of congealing substance as a metaphor for value is to underscore the *socially binding* or *plasticizing action of capitalist abstractions*.⁶³ And more specifically, they do so to emphasize the *synthetic action* of an abstraction-like value—the way it palpably shapes the empirical world of collective activity to which it belongs and in which it acts. This view stands in vivid contrast to both the idea of value as an inert substance residing in the individual commodity after its production and forming one of its natural properties (as in the embodied-labor value theory of Smith and Ricardo, who as Marx notes neglect “the form of value which in fact turns value into exchange-value”) and also the idea of value as a “void” or ontologically empty form constituted entirely in the exchange process (as in some versions of Marxist value-form theory, which like what Marx describes as a contemporary form of neomercantilism explicitly opposed to classical political economy runs the risk of “see[ing] in value *only* the social form, or rather its insubstantial semblance”).⁶⁴ If the former “overlook[s] the specificity of the value-*form*” (which is acquired in the exchange of already produced commodities for money), the latter overlooks its “substance” (which is acquired in the production process itself, through the interaction of living and dead labor).⁶⁵

Value, as depicted with strikingly materialist imagery in both Halpern and Marx, is neither an inert “crystal” created in a production process isolated from circulation *nor* a pure form constituted in an exchange process isolated from production and operating on an entirely separate plane from everyday practical activity (although, as Beverly Best stresses, it is inherent to the social mechanism of abstraction, which is the “core function of the capitalist mode of production,” that value take on the objective *appearance* of this independence or autonomy).⁶⁶ Value is rather, as the acts of catachrestic or “abusive” metaphor enable both Marx and Halpern to emphasize, a social relationship brought into being by the unintended and uncoordinated actions of a multitude of actors. Hence, in line with previous arguments made by Wolff, Kincaid, and Best, I would argue that *only* a catachrestic use of language seems adequate to both authors for objectively capturing the contradictions of value and the world that it and other capitalist abstractions bring into being. Like the abstract or socially necessary labor that constitutes it, value is an “emergent” phenomenon that demands catachresis as its only truly logical form of representation. Neither an obdurately thingly substance nor an

“insubstantial semblance” or contentless, frictionless form but a “suprasensible or social” relationship whose representation *requires* a constant crossing of the realms of “the spirit” and “the beef,” value is something like the generic Animal perversely commingling with specific real animals below, in Marx’s allegory of money as the relatively autonomous, freestanding expression of exchange-value that the “realization” of value created in production necessitates and that in turn constitutes its form:

It is as if, in addition to lions, tigers, hares, and all other really existing animals which together constitute the various families, species, subspecies, etc., of the animal kingdom, *the animal* would also exist, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom.⁶⁷

Fabular yet scientific (we hear echoes of both Aesop and Darwin), this portrait of a capitalist abstraction never fails to give me the willies, perhaps for reasons identical to those underpinning the willies that Johnson gets from the idea of eating a smiley face.

Highlighting the synthetic and plasticizing effects of capitalist abstractions, and the fact that they are continuous with concrete activities while only seeming to be entirely autonomous, Halpern’s use of catachresis to describe the abstract-allegorical work of the soldier’s body in *Music for Porn* thus helps clarify what might be at stake for Marx in his own use of the figure to describe “value-forming substance” in “The Value Form.” There is a key difference, however, in how the agency of abstraction gets figured in Marx and Halpern. For in contrast to Marx’s description of the value expressed in the exchange-value of the commodity as Gallerte, animal parts boiled and then cooled to harden into a semisolid jelly, the dominant image in *Music for Porn* is not that of a *material substance* congealing *into* something. It is rather that of an *intangible abstraction*, congealing *around a nothing*, or void (my underlining in the following):

The consistency of the situation hangs on the body, being a hole around which everything that appears appears to cohere. (119)

And now, as the rain keeps falling on this deserted town, my social relations cohere around all these militiamen I want to fuck inside abstracted huts where no one lives anymore. (4)

Sensing its own decay, value clings with fierce tenacity to the very things bodies that will be sacrificed for it. (153)

Even after swallowing his piss, I still see myself everywhere I

look, a series of seemingly endless grammatical subordinations, circling the withdrawn violence that structures the limits of our perceptual field, a blank in my own dislocation.

note the nimbus around his withdrawn corpse, function of pure exchange (55)

A whole metaphorics of love and war *my phalynx of clichés converge around his vulnerability to penetration.* (56)

As if to suggest a portrait of catachresis itself, understood as a figurative operation based on a “lexical lacuna,” or the “absence of an original proper term which has been lost or never existed,” everything that “cohere[s]” or “converge[s]” in the lines above does so around a “hole.”⁶⁸ Social relations cohere in a deserted place. Value clings to what will eventually be sacrificed in its name. A nimbus collects around the space left empty by a withdrawn corpse. Substitutions circle around a blank. Metaphorics converge around a wound or orifice (evoked by “vulnerability to penetration”). And note, again, that what coheres *around* these sites of past, present, and future absence is not a tangible substance but an abstraction: “everything,” “social relations,” “value,” “substitutions,” “metaphorics.”

Is this imagery of abstraction hardening around nothing not an allegory of the “ontological emptiness which lies at the heart of capitalism,” which is the inherent emptiness of the value form?⁶⁹ Not exactly, since as with the other abstractions above—“social relations,” “everything”—its insistence is on “value” as a “suprasensible or social” *substance* in the process of plasticizing. Moreover, the void around which this synthetic action takes place is not an “ontological emptiness” but a space that Halpern is careful to show as having been *rendered* empty, by the agency of social actors, from something in it having been actively *withdrawn*. I therefore think that the image of the “hole” or “blank” around which social substance is shown cohering in *Music for Porn* is summoned to metaphorically counteract the impulse to triumphantly uncover a thingly substance—as opposed to an emergent or unintended social relationship—as the hidden truth of every abstraction. At the same time, the image of matter hardening or congealing seems contrapuntally deployed to combat our temptation to regard the abstractions in *Music for Porn* as ideal or immaterial: that, because the “soldier’s body *hieroglyph of value*” is an abstraction cohering around nothing, as opposed to a kernel of matter obscured by a shell of abstraction, it is therefore somehow less real than the “car that runs you over.”

Applied to “value” in a way that seems intended to produce a visceral response, the almost cartoonish “concrete” image of hardening substance seems

put to work, in other words, like a prophylactic seal or caulk against the idea, recently resurrected by many of the “new materialisms,” that abstractions are exclusively thought-induced mystifications of particularity—and therefore mystifications that can be easily dissolved simply by being corrected *with* thought. Calling attention to the oft-remarked tension between the concrete and abstract dimensions of *Capital* as well as to its own illicit coupling of poetry and theory, *Music for Porn*’s openly catachrestic poetics thus clarifies the stake of Marx’s similarly catachrestic use of Gallerte and/or congelation as a *metaphor* for the theoretical *concept* of abstract, value-constituting labor. But in addition to providing an exaggerated, figurative way of impeding the dissemination of the increasingly popular conception that “abstract” means “not real,” the metaphor also implies that with the objective distortions of logic created by capitalism, its own act of exaggeration is somehow *theoretically* necessary. In this manner, Halpern’s use of catachresis dramatizes what Wolff, Kincaid, and others note Marx uses the “performative dimension” of *Capital* to dramatize: that an “abuse” of logic by the analyst—including the logic of equivalence and substitution which underpins metaphor—is perversely required to show how the basic relations and operations of capital make sense.⁷⁰ It also highlights another peculiarity of capitalist reproduction already visible in the passage from “The Value-Form.” Although what makes capitalism distinctive is its historically unprecedented integration of production and circulation—starting from the worker’s “free” exchange of her labor-power as a commodity, production and exchange mediate each other at every point—the two spheres can often appear autonomous, even to extremely perceptive and dedicated analysts of the system.⁷¹ A kind of “abuse” strangely begins to seem necessary to restore the fundamental connection between the two halves in representation, as evinced when we begin to suspect that Marx’s references to labor “in a coagulated state” in *Capital* are a deliberately hyperbolic, catachrestic way of reminding us of the material effects that abstract social labor, qua “relation of social validation” established exclusively in exchange, ends up having on labor actually used or expended in production. Labor is abstracted or socially homogenized by the practice of social actors in *both* capitalist exchange and capitalist production, in *both* the realization of value and the valorization of value, but in different ways that seem to call for different registers of discourse (recall the shift in language between the two paragraphs above). *Music for Porn* suggests that the effort to rejoin these languages, part of its larger effort to think labor as use-value and exchange-value together, will inevitably involve a poetics of catachresis.⁷²

The visceral abstractions in *Capital* and *Music for Porn* thus finally direct our attention to a philosophical problem. In theory, it always seems unmistakably

clear that whatever value is or can be said to be, one thing that we can all say it is definitively *not* is an inherent, unchanging property of the individual objects in which it is said to reside. This is strikingly true for “value” in its three main incarnations. Moral values such as “good” and “bad” are most conspicuously projections of subjective evaluations onto objects—evaluations that are ultimately expressions of desire and the will to power, Friedrich Nietzsche argues, even when they seem or purport to be neutral. Similarly, but in a way that is less obvious and for reasons Kant devotes the entire *Critique of Judgment* to showing, the aesthetic value of “beauty” is not an objective quality possessed by the thing judged beautiful but a subjective feeling of pleasure referring to a harmonious relationship between the subjective capacities of the judge. Finally, and perhaps least obviously of all, a commodity’s value is not a property that the individual commodity possesses in and of itself. Nor is its magnitude determined by the amount of labor or time an individual producer has expended on and thereby “stored” in the commodity. Value, as Marx repeatedly shows us, is not a thing nor the property of an individual thing but a process and a complex, dynamic relationship between multiple social actors.

Yet in a way also strikingly true for all its forms—moral, aesthetic, economic—value *cannot but be perceived* as an inherent property of individual things, and *cannot but be spoken of* as an inherent property of individual things. Value *itself* is not illusory in the sense of unreal or insubstantial, as Marx and Halpern draw on their array of almost exaggeratedly materialist images to underscore. Like the generic Animal incongruously mingling with specific animals, value is just as much a part of the empirical world as the human beings whose uncoordinated actions give rise to it. But there is something illusory *about* value, in that it not only objectively but by *necessity* appears as something that it is finally not (a free-standing property of individual objects). This “spectral objectivity”—or is it an objective spectrality?—is something that capitalist value holds *in common* with aesthetic and moral value, as I noted above.⁷³ Yet the aesthetic representations that I have been referring to as “visceral abstractions” in this essay—Johnson’s smiley face, Halpern’s soldier’s body, even Marx’s Animal—bring this peculiar aspect of value in general home to us in a way that the concept of capitalist value does not. Precisely by triggering crude and elemental feelings, these representations allegorize the catachresis of the value form with an affective power that mirrors the “material force” of all capitalist abstractions.⁷⁴

Notes

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1. Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4.
2. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* online, “visceral,” www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/visceral (accessed November 17, 2013).
3. Leigh Claire La Berge, “The Rules of Abstraction: Methods and Discourses of Finance,” *Radical History Review*, no. 118 (Winter 2014): 93.
4. La Berge, “Rules of Abstraction,” 93, 96. As La Berge puts it, the characterization of financial operations as abstract would “seem less to elucidate financial operations than to obfuscate them,” calling forth, on the one hand, “an immediately knowable and representable world of institutional financial transactions,” but then “suspend[ing] knowledge and description of that world by claiming its mechanisms are beyond our collective cognitive, linguistic, and epistemological reach” (93).
5. Encyclopedia of Marxism, Marxist Internet Archive, s.vv. “abstract,” “concrete,” www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/a/b.htm (accessed May 1, 2014). The argument that the method of presentation (as opposed to the method of inquiry) in Marx’s *Capital* tends to move from the abstract to the increasingly concrete is the generally accepted account, based on Marx’s remarks in his draftwork. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 100–108, esp. 101, 108. For a more-nuanced account of the dialectical relationship between the abstract and concrete in Marx’s presentation as it relates to the tension between logic and history in his method overall, see Ernest Mandel, introduction to Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 11–86, esp. 20–21 (cited in Beverly Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation: An Aesthetics of Political Economy* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010], 91–93). Kevin Floyd follows Mandel’s lead in noting that, contrary to his remarks in the *Grundrisse*, Marx’s method in *Capital* involves a “double movement” from concrete to abstract and then abstract to concrete. In the first movement, a “chaotic conception of the whole” like capitalism is broken down into increasingly simple abstractions (commodity, value, human labor in the abstract, socially necessary labor, etc.), which are disclosed as determinations that internally differentiate that totality, while in the sec-

ond movement, the simple abstractions “are themselves concretized by establishing the simultaneous differentiation and connection *between* the various determinations to which they refer—by establishing, for example, the social process of capital of which social class, wage labor, and value are all defining moments.” See Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 28. For an alternative argument highlighting the predominance of abstraction in Marx’s own method of analysis as continuous with the social abstraction that is the motor and defining characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, see Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation*, esp. 61–116.

6. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 101.
7. La Berge, “Rules of Abstraction,” 97.
8. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Dusquesne University Press, 1969), 24.
9. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 104.
10. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.
11. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 104–5.
12. See Jimmy Stamp, “Who Really Invented the Smiley Face,” *Smithsonian.com*, March 13, 2013, blogs.smithsonianmag.com/design/2013/03/who-really-invented-the-smiley-face.
13. Rob Halpern, *Music for Porn* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2012), 153.
14. Marx puts this last phrase in scare quotes, seeming to indicate his ironic distance from it, but there is no attributed source. See Marx, *Capital*, 1:129.
15. The phrase *abstract labor* is used rather sparingly by Marx. Its uses are concentrated in the first chapter of volume 1 of *Capital*, where they always appear in jarring conjunction with the image of “congealed” labor or labor-time. There is only a single subsequent reference in the rest of volume 1, where Marx’s irony becomes less concentrated and less ambiguous (isolated sarcastic remarks pop up, but also clearly signposted as such), as his analysis of capital becomes increasingly historical. There are no uses of the phrase *abstract labor* in the unfinished volumes 2 and 3, where Marx’s use of irony is also more intermittent and clearly demarcated. (An index entry exists for *abstract labor* in volume 2, but the entry seems to have been created not for this precise phrase but for mentions of “value-forming labor.”) The appearance of the phrase *abstract labor* thus seems roughly to correlate with the intensity of Marx’s irony and use of figurative language, and to correlate inversely with the concreteness of his analysis of capital. For all these reasons the phrase *abstract labor* (if not its concept or meaning) needs to be seen as one about which Marx himself clearly had some ambivalence, perhaps because of, as I show below, the explicitly metaphorical language that its elucidation appears to require. At the same time, a robust body of work has grown around the concept of value-forming labor as “abstract” labor by commentators who recognize—rightly—that despite the infrequency of the term in Marx’s

- writing and the verbal and tonal ambiguity that surrounds its usage, the “value theory of labor” it describes is absolutely central to Marx’s theory as a whole. For this reason, I examine the concept of abstract labor from the perspective of these commentators before turning to the more complex difficulties it presents in the writing of Marx himself. On Marx’s theory of value as a “value theory of labor” as opposed to a labor theory of value, see Diane Elson, “The Value Theory of Labour,” in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: CSE Books, 1979), 115–80.
16. Jim Kincaid, “A Critique of Value-Form Marxism,” *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 2 (2005): 99.
 17. Kincaid, “Critique of Value-Form Marxism,” 99.
 18. Marx, *Capital*, 1:165. Marx uses this phrase to describe commodities, “sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social,” but as Nicole Pepperell and others have noted, the concept applies to abstract labor, value, and capital as well. See Pepperell, “Disassembling Capital” (PhD diss., RMIT University, 2010), 1.
 19. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 172.
 20. Ernest Mandel, introduction to Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Two* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 15.
 21. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.
 22. Marx, *Capital*, 1:166–67; my emphasis.
 23. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 225.
 24. Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: 2. Marx*, trans. Ferenc Jánossy (London: Merlin, 1978), 40.
 25. Pepperell, “Disassembling Capital,” 16–17.
 26. Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s “Capital,”* trans. Alex Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 50.
 27. Marx, *Capital*, 1:129. I am grateful to Jasper Bernes for stressing this point to me (e-mail message to author, February 20, 2014). The reverse is also true, since socially necessary abstract labor is also adjusted in response to the concrete, historical development of technology and the skill of workers. On this see Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation*, 15; see also I. I. Rubin, “Marx’s Labor Theory of Value,” in *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, trans. Milos Samardzija and Fredy Perlman (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2010), 61–275, 119–20 (quoted in Best).
 28. Elson, “Value Theory of Labour,” 148–50.
 29. Heinrich, *Introduction*, 50.
 30. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1978), 33.
 31. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 161. As Marx puts it: “Their own collisions with one another produce an alien social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them. Circulation, because a totality of the

social process, is also the first form in which the social relation appears as something independent of the individuals, but not only as, say, in a coin or in exchange value, but extending to the whole of the social movement itself. The social relation of individuals to one another as a power over the individuals which has become autonomous, whether conceived as a natural force, as chance or in whatever other form, is a necessary result of the fact that the point of departure is not the free social individual. Circulation as the first totality among the economic categories is well suited to bring this to light" (196–97).

32. Lucio Colletti, "Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International," in *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. John Merrington and Judith White (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 87.
33. Colletti, "Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International," 87.
34. Rubin, "Marx's Labor Theory of Value," 142; my emphasis.
35. I am therefore with Pepperell when she argues that interpreters of Marx's theory of the fetish character of the commodity form are just slightly off when they describe it as a theory of how an *intersubjective* relationship among human agents takes on the appearance of a property of things. As Pepperell notes, the commodity as value-bearing form more accurately points to "a distinctive type of *non*-intersubjective social relation" ("Disassembling Capital," 95).
36. Patrick Murray, "Marx's 'Truly Social' Labour Theory of Value: Part I, Abstract Labor in Marxian Value Theory," *Historical Materialism* 6 (Summer 2000): 27–65.
37. As Murray further disambiguates, the concept of abstract "physiological" labor used in political economy refers to an aspect of *all* labor and is thus a "general abstraction," whereas the concept of "practically abstract" labor introduced by Marx refers to a specific *kind* of labor and is thus a "determinate abstraction" ("Marx's 'Truly Social' Labour Theory of Value," 32).
38. Note the irony here: it is the superficially concrete-sounding approach to abstract labor as simple physiological labor that is the most abstract or general abstraction, since it applies to the labor of every single society, while the much more abstract-sounding definition of abstract labor as a "relation of social validation" is the concrete or determinate abstraction, both in the sense of being specific to capitalism and also in the sense of being achieved by the empirical activity of human beings.
39. Marx, *Capital*, 1:137, 135, 134, 135.
40. Marx, *Capital*, 1:140; my emphasis.
41. Marx, *Capital*, 1:142; my emphasis.
42. For Murray, there is something "ludicrous" about the very act of describing "abstract" labor as "congealed" or "embodied" ("Marx's 'Truly Social' Labor Theory of Value," 57–58).
43. For a particular example of focus on the "performative dimension," see David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's "Capital," Volume 2* (New York: Verso, 2013), 306. On "double-voicing," see Dominick LaCapra, "Reading Marx: The Case of *The Eighth*

- teenth Brumaire*,” in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 270. For a particularly interesting example of the difficulty of distinguishing Marx’s perspective from those of the economists he subjects to critique, see Harvey, *Companion to Marx’s “Capital,” Volume 2* (New York: Verso, 2013), 306.
44. Katrin Pahl, *Tropes of Transport* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012). “Pundits of economics”: Edmund Wilson, quoted in Robert Paul Wolff, *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky: On the Literary Structure of Capital* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 9.
 45. Wolff, *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky*, 54.
 46. Murray, “Marx’s ‘Truly Social’ Labour Theory of Value,” 60, 57. At the same time, Murray also argues that the copresence of the specifically Marxist concept of abstract, value-forming labor and political economy’s concept of abstract, in the sense of “simple” physiological labor, is due to the fact that “the concept of abstract labor is presupposed by the concept of value-producing labor . . . : we need to know what it means for labor to be abstract before we can tell whether or not a certain social type of labor is abstract in practice. So the ‘physiological’ concept of labor is a necessary object of analysis, even though it is not the ultimate object of analysis” (60).
 47. Murray, “Marx’s ‘Truly Social’ Labour Theory of Value,” 60. I hear an echo of G. W. F. Hegel’s equally ironic presentation of the claim to certainty of the second of the “two Enlightenments” into which pure Insight splits after its antagonistic conflict with Faith in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For this second Enlightenment (who may in fact be Descartes?), “*pure matter* is merely what is *left over* when *we abstract* from, feeling, tasting, etc., i.e. it is not matter that is seen, tasted, felt, etc.; what is seen, felt, tasted, is not *matter*, but color, a stone, a salt, etc. Matter is rather a *pure abstraction*; and so what we are presented with here is the *pure essence of thought*, or pure thought itself as the Absolute, which contains no differences, is indeterminate and devoid of predicates” (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 351, para. 577).
 48. Highlighting Marx’s description of *Capital* as a narrative featuring “characters” placed on an “economic stage” (1:179; quoted in Pepperell, “Disassembling Capital,” 73), Pepperell more specifically argues that Marx makes his representatives of the ideas of bourgeois economy (never explicitly marked as such) deliver their monologues (also never explicitly marked as such) from the one-sided perspectives of Hegel’s Perception, Understanding, and Force. Pepperell cautions that we therefore cannot unilaterally trust Marx to mean what he is saying in the first six chapters of *Capital*—not, however, because he is attempting to obscure or deconstruct his own theory, but precisely in the interests of constructing an imminent critical theory.
 49. Hegel himself often satirizes the claims to certainty of his shapes of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* (the hilarious phrenologist of Observing Reason, for example, for whom “the being of Spirit is a bone”) (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 208, para. 343).

50. In the second section of the first chapter of volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx plainly states that like the dual character of the commodity (use-value and exchange-value), “labour, too, has a dual character: in so far as it finds its expression in value, it no longer possesses the same characteristics as when it is the creator of use-values. I was the first to point out and examine critically this twofold nature of the labor contained in commodities” (1:132).
51. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 140. Heinrich, *Introduction*, 50, 54. For an overview of the key differences between the neo-Ricardian, “crystalised-labour” or “embodied labour” approach to Marx’s labor theory of value and the “abstract labour” approach,” see Alfredo Saad-Filho, “Concrete and Abstract Labor in Marx’s Theory of Value,” *Review of Political Economy* 9, no. 4 (1997): 457–77. Departing from Heinrich and others who emphasize (I think rightly) that abstract labor is not labor expended in production (though this emphasis runs the risk of giving the impression that abstract and concrete are freestanding *types* of labor), Saad-Filho helpfully argues that “in capitalism workers perform concrete and abstract labour simultaneously.” More specifically, the “commodity’s use value is created by the concrete labour performed, and its value is created by the simultaneous performance of abstract labour” (468).
52. For an explicitly political critique of the misinterpretation of abstract labor as physiological labor (and a useful survey of different approaches to Marx’s theory of abstract labor), see Werner Bonefeld, “Abstract Labor: Against Its Nature and on Its Time,” *Capital and Class* 34 (2010): 257–76.
53. Keston Sutherland, “Marx in Jargon,” *world picture* 1 (2008), worldpicturejournal.com/World%20Picture/WP_1.1/KSutherland.html.
54. This observation about Marx’s use of catachresis in his account of the relation between abstract labor and value is by no means original. For a helpful overview of differing theories of catachresis and a brief deconstructive account of the trope’s role in Marx’s writing in particular, see Gerald Possett, “The Tropological Economy of Catachresis,” *Metaphors of Economy*, ed. Nicole Bracker and Stefan Herbrechter (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 81–94. For a more extensive account of Marx’s concept of “value” as catachresis mediated through a reading of Gayatri Spivak’s writings on value, see Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation*, 80–82. Both Possett and Best approach catachresis as a “figurative and performative act of resignification which—in applying (abusively) a familiar term with a somewhat different signification—does not signify a pre-discursive object, but rather constitutes the identity of what is named” (Possett, “Tropological Economy,” 86), as “a name that has no literal or adequate referent but is used as if it did, temporarily and provisionally, so that a narrative can be constructed around it” (Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation*, 80). Similar to what Pierre Fontanier calls a trope of “forced and necessary usage” (quoted in Possett, “Tropological Economy,” 86, 84), I use the term

- to convey the broader, more literal meaning of the Greek word *katachrêsis* as “abuse” or “improper use.”
55. Marx, *Capital*, 1:126. Or is it because there is an inevitable crossing of semantic registers in Marx’s implicit characterization of the “material content” of value as “abstract labor” and its “social form” as “exchange-value”? Everyday language and practice arguably make it strange for most of us to think of something abstract as being material.
 56. This is the simple but powerful question Wolff devotes the entirety of his short book to answering: “What is the logical connection between Marx’s literarily brilliant ironic discourse and his ‘metaphysical’ account of the nature of bourgeois social reality? Why *must* Marx write as he does if he is to accomplish the intellectual tasks he has set for himself?” (*Moneybags Must Be So Lucky*, 10).
 57. Halpern’s phrase echoes this passage from volume 1 of *Capital*: “Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it. *Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.* Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language. The belated scientific discovery that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind’s development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labour. Something which is only valid for this particular form of production, the production of commodities, namely the fact that the specific social character of private labors carried on independently of each other consists in their equality as human labour, and, in the product, assumes the form of the existence of value, appears to those caught up in the relations of commodity production (and this is true both before and after the above-mentioned scientific discovery) to be just as ultimately valid as the fact that the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts left the atmosphere itself unaltered in its physical configuration” (166–67; my emphasis).
 58. One finds numerous precedents in literature for these pornographic archetypes. See, e.g., Melville’s Handsome Sailor, represented as both an object of male desire and a sociological type in *Billy Budd*, as well as the poems of the modernist Luis Cernuda, who caresses his “Young Sailor” as both a hot body *and* a cool abstraction.
 59. Halpern, “Notes on Affection and War,” in *Music for Porn*, 56.
 60. Halpern, “Notes on Affection and War,” 57; my emphasis.

61. Here, as if to highlight the thinness of the border simultaneously connecting and separating the concrete and the abstract in *Music for Porn*, these words refer to physical matter existing in such an attenuated or reduced form (as in “*distillations of capital laminated on my skin*,” 158) that it verges on seeming, well, “abstract.”
62. These complex maneuvers are not the only way in which *Music for Porn* explores the dialectical relation between the concrete and abstract. The book also deploys a much more straightforward alignment of “the spirit and the beef” (5), an anomalous pairing echoed by “this confluence of widget and plasma” (35) and “the convergence of lyric and ballistics” (25). At the sentence level, moreover, highly specific local details often get densely piled up only to veer off into abstraction at the last minute, yet by way of that abstraction, leading to the specificities of a vast global economy: “Rocky lowlands, marginal wood ferns densely covered with golden fur and rare lichens brought in from the island, bind the world to theologies of labor, all the cotton gins and pharmaceuticals” (8). A paragraph beginning with historically meaningful descriptive details such as a soldier in “traditional grey, loose fitting Afghan salwar kameez clothing” culminates in the flat announcement of “his particularity being no more than a type” (151).
63. I owe the evocative term “plasticizing” to Jasper Bernes.
64. See Marx, *Capital*, 1:174n34. According to Christopher Arthur, the value-form “expresses an ontological emptiness which lies at the heart of capitalism” (quoted in Kincaid, “Critique of Value-Form Marxism,” 88).
65. Marx, *Capital*, 1:174n34.
66. Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation*, 20.
67. Marx, quoted in Heinrich, *Introduction*, 78.
68. Possett, “Topological Economy,” 86.
69. Arthur, quoted in Kincaid, “Critique of Value-Form Marxism,” 88.
70. Kincaid, “Critique of Value-Form Marxism,” 86.
71. For an example of how this disconnection between production and circulation plays out in the world of theory, see Joshua Clover, “Value/Theory/Crisis,” *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 107–13.
72. It is useful here to note La Berge’s reminder that in “Marx’s own Marxism, abstract and concrete are not mutually exclusive positions”; rather, “each is possible only in its realization of the other” (“Rules of Abstraction,” 98). Departing from other commentators who argue that only abstract labor is specific to capitalism (see, e.g., Bonefeld, “Abstract Labor”; and Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993]), Elson argues that because of the unity (if also relative autonomy) of production and circulation in capitalism, the relation between concrete and abstract labor, like that of socially necessary labor to value, is not one of “discretely distinct variables which have to be brought into correspondence” but “one of both continuity and

difference” such as that existing between the differing forms of appearance of a single organic substance. For Elson, Marx’s natural or chemical and biological metaphors of “crystallization” and “embodiment” are used to index precisely this metamorphosis or “change of form” (“Value Theory of Labour,” 139). For his part, Postone rigorously traces this inseparability of the abstract and concrete back to the dual nature of the commodity form; its fundamental split between exchange-value and use-value giving rise to the very idea of “labor expressible in [both] abstract and concrete dimensions” and to all the forms that come to embody this particular tension in turn (including value, money, and time itself); see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. Taking a slightly different approach, Floyd suggests that the concrete and abstract dimensions of the commodity (and by extension, of commodity-producing labor) as elucidated by Marx are inseparable *because* of the inseparability of concrete and abstract in Marx’s larger methodology (*Reification of Desire*, 28).

73. “Spectral objectivity” is an alternative translation of Marx’s “gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit,” which Ben Fowkes translates as “phantom-like objectivity” (*Capital*, 1:128). See Heinrich, *Introduction*, 49. What distinguishes economic value based on abstract labor from all the other kinds of value, Lukács argues, is that while the other kinds presuppose and reflect a given kind of sociality, the former produces and also reproduces this sociality on an extended scale. See Lukács, *Ontology of Social Being*, 154.
74. Marx writes, “The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses” (“A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm [accessed May 13, 2014]).